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# ILLITERACY IN CANADA

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POLITICAL AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS DIVISION

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
INTRODUCTION.....	1
DEFINING THE PROBLEM.....	3
EXTENT OF ILLITERACY IN CANADA.....	5
A. Geographic Location.....	6
B. Age, Gender and Language.....	8
C. Immigrants.....	9
D. Native People.....	10
E. The Incarcerated.....	11
THE EFFECTS OF ILLITERACY.....	12
A. Economic Costs.....	12
B. Social Effects.....	13
1. Poverty.....	14
2. Unemployment.....	14
3. Personal Problems.....	16
REMEDIAL MEASURES.....	16
A. Government Programs.....	16
B. The Voluntary Sector and Others.....	19
CONCLUSION.....	21
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	22
APPENDIX	





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ILLITERACY IN CANADA

INTRODUCTION

A high level of literacy is one of the attributes of those modern, civilized societies among which Canada is usually counted and in which free and compulsory education of children has long been the norm. In recent years, however, disturbing doubts have been cast upon the validity of previous assumptions about the state of literacy in Canada.

During the late 19th century, illiteracy was recognized as a major social problem and there was a growing awareness of the importance of education in national development. "Everywhere the socially concerned were promoting more regular and improved schooling ... as a solution to many of the social ills of their time ... Governments worked to achieve the aims of educational reform by legislating free schooling and compulsory school attendance, along with programs designed to improve what went on in schools. By 1905 all provinces except Quebec had laws requiring young children (initially those between the ages of seven and twelve) to attend school for certain minimum periods."<sup>(1)</sup> In 1942, education to the age of 14 years was made compulsory in Quebec.

Between 1900 and 1950, the level of education of young people in Canadian cities improved markedly. The percentage of young men between the ages of 20 and 24 years who had nine to twelve years of education increased from 19.8% to 41.9% in Montreal and from 25.8% to 53.3% in Toronto during these years.<sup>(2)</sup>

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(1) Alison Prentice, et al., Canadian Women: A History, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Toronto, 1988, p. 155.

(2) S.H. Milner and H. Milner, The Decolonization of Quebec, McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 1973, p. 233.



In 1931, the Census classified only 5% of the Canadian population aged 15 and over as illiterate. Later, the use of this term in Census facts was discontinued.

During the years following the Second World War, school attendance increased and it was generally assumed that illiteracy as a major problem was a thing of the past in Canada. UNESCO statistics on the subject treated this nation as one of those advanced societies in which the adult illiteracy rate was estimated at less than 5%. A study published in 1957 included Canada in a group of countries in which illiteracy was considered to be of "insignificant proportions."<sup>(3)</sup> Again in 1965, less than 5% of the population aged 15 and over was estimated to be illiterate.<sup>(4)</sup> Canada, therefore, assisted in promoting literacy in "third world" countries abroad while a degree of complacency existed about the home situation.

Contrary to public expectations, however, compulsory education and even high school attendance did not eliminate illiteracy. In 1961, author Barbara Moon warned that Canada as a nation was suffering from widespread under-education. She drew attention to the reality that more than 200,000 Canadian adults had never been to school, that 870,000 had gone no further than Grade 4 and that seven million adults in this country had not finished high school.<sup>(5)</sup>

It has since become clear, as well, that length of school attendance is not an accurate measurement of literacy; the problem of illiteracy is more complex than that. There are many possible reasons why some adults have not achieved the level of education necessary to function in our society. These may be related to age, gender, social class, origin, and geographic location.

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(3) World Illiteracy at Mid-Century, Monographs on Fundamental Education No. XI, UNESCO, 1957.

(4) Sir Charles Jeffries, Illiteracy: A World Problem, Pall Mall Press, London, 1967, p. 24.

(5) Barbara Moon, Maclean's, 6 May 1961, referred to in E.C.L. Reports, No. 3, Aspects of Illiteracy, Education Centre Library, The Board of Education for the City of Toronto, May 1962, p. 39.



Whatever the reasons, it is clear that illiteracy results in a great loss of potential, both for the state and the individual. Although its overall effects are often hidden, they impinge on economic development and unemployment, and, on the personal level, on health, social adjustment and general well-being.

The importance of literacy can hardly be over-estimated. "The whole social, political and economic structure of the modern community rests on the assumption that every citizen can communicate, and be communicated with, by means of the written or printed word."<sup>(6)</sup>

#### DEFINING THE PROBLEM

In order to assess the extent and effects of illiteracy, it is necessary to define the problem clearly. Suggested criteria for measurement of literacy, however, have proven to be problematic. Although a number of definitions have been proposed, none has been universally accepted.

A United Nations commission in 1948 defined literacy as the ability to read and write a simple message. This meaning was expanded by a 1978 UNESCO definition of "basic" literacy: "A person is literate who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his everyday life."<sup>(7)</sup> The lack of this degree of literacy is sometimes referred to as "absolute illiteracy."

It has been recognized, however, that more than this basic level of literacy is needed to cope with the normal requirements of life in modern society. In order to participate fully in community activities, a set of skills is required. These are encompassed in the 1978 UNESCO definition of "functional literacy":

A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and

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(6) Jeffries (1967), p. 3.

(7) A.M. Thomas, Adult Illiteracy in Canada - A Challenge, Canadian Commission for UNESCO, Ottawa, 1983, p. 19.



also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development.(8)

In this sense, literacy is viewed as a means of self-fulfillment and participation in society. Functional literacy, therefore, is a relative concept, with different conceivable standards, depending on the various demands of life in particular societies. It is far more complex and difficult to measure than basic literacy.

UNESCO established the attainment of Grade 9 as the standard for functional literacy and this measurement has been accepted by most industrialized nations, including Canada. The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, has acknowledged that in this country there is some justification for this standard, insofar as "there is a societal expectation that young people will complete Grade 9 or Grade 10 and become literate before leaving school."(9)

The Parliamentary Task Force on Employment Opportunities for the '80s accepted this standard in adopting the definition of functional illiteracy used in the 1960s by the Canadian Association of Adult Education: "The functionally illiterate make up that part of the population, 15 years of age and older, not attending school full-time and with a level of education less than grade nine."(10) Statistics Canada tabulations provide data on school attainment precisely for this group within the population.

The term "Adult Basic Education" (ABE) has also been used in this country as a measure of functional literacy. An individual who has completed Grade 9 of an ABE program is considered functionally literate according to the Census school attainment standard.

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(8) The 1978 UNESCO Revised Recommendation Concerning the International Standardization of Educational Statistics, quoted in Thomas (1983) p. 19.

(9) John C. Cairns, Adult Illiteracy in Canada, Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, Toronto 1988, p. 5.

(10) Canada, Parliamentary Task Force on Employment Opportunities for the '80s, Work for Tomorrow, Ottawa, 1981, p. 68.



The Southam Literacy Survey, a nationwide examination of the state of literacy in Canada, was carried out in 1987. It was based on the definition of functional literacy as the ability of a person to use "printed and written information to function in society,"<sup>(11)</sup> an ability viewed as being necessary in order to develop one's knowledge and potential and to achieve personal goals.

## EXTENT OF ILLITERACY IN CANADA

Statistics Canada estimates show that there were 3.5 million Canadians 15 years and over with less than Grade 9 education in 1988.<sup>(12)</sup> A statistical review for 1986-87 shows that the percentage of such Canadians in the population decreased each year between 1982 and 1986, from 21.6% in 1982 to 18.7% in 1986.<sup>(13)</sup> The last figure, however, representing nearly one in every five adults, still gives cause for serious concern. In view of the fact that even high school graduation has been found not to guarantee literacy, the problem is even more serious than these figures show.

Based on its own testing measures, the 1987 Southam Survey revealed that some 4.5 million adult Canadian residents were functionally illiterate. It was estimated that this figure would have been increased by 500,000 if the survey had been extended to include certain groups with special problems of ability, motivation or accessibility to education. These unsurveyed groups included "prisoners, transients, the mentally retarded, natives on reserves, people living north of the 60th parallel

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(11) Peter Calamai, Broken Words: Why Five Million Canadians are Illiterate, A Special Southam Survey, McLaren, Morris and Todd, Toronto, 1987, p. 7.

(12) Statistics Canada, The Labour Force, July 1988, p. 31; see Appendix, p. i.

(13) Statistics Canada, Education in Canada, A Statistical Review for 1986-87, 1988, p. 249.

and all immigrants unable to speak either of Canada's official languages." (14)

Even with these groups excluded, the Survey found that, based on tests in English or French, 24% of Canadian residents 18 years of age and older are illiterate; among the Canadian-born only, the illiteracy rate is 22%. (15)

A surprising finding of the Survey was that high school or even university education did not ensure functional literacy; about 8% of university graduates sampled were not able to pass the survey test. (16) Some Canadian universities, recognizing that inadequate high school instruction has resulted in illiterate students with poor writing skills, have introduced requirements for the passing of language competency tests in the university program. (17)

The extent of illiteracy in Canada appears to vary according to certain factors such as geographic location, age, gender and language, and to be greater among certain groups, such as immigrants, Native people and the incarcerated.

#### A. Geographic Location

The Southam Survey indicated that, in general, the problem of illiteracy increases in severity from west to east in Canada. The lowest rates were in the four western provinces, ranging from 17% in British Columbia to 21% in Alberta, and the highest were in Newfoundland (44%) and Quebec (28%). (18) Similarly, research in 1983 showed that participation rates in adult education courses were generally higher in the

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(14) Calamai (1987), p. 7.

(15) Ibid.

(16) Ibid., p. 7 and 22.

(17) Andrew Nikiforuk, "University Students Who Cannot Write," Maclean's, 25 November 1985, p. 56-57.

(18) Ibid., p. 9, and see Appendix, p. ii.



western provinces, ranging from 21% in British Columbia and 25% in Alberta to 9% in Newfoundland and 13% in New Brunswick.(19)

The median years of schooling among Canadian adults in 1986 ranged from 10.7 in the Northwest Territories and 10.9 in Newfoundland to 12.4 in British Columbia, the Yukon, Alberta and Ontario; for Canada, the median was 12.2 years.(20)

Illiteracy was, and to a lesser extent still is, an aspect of life in isolated rural areas. About 30% of the 250,000 people living in Saskatchewan's rural areas, for example, were functionally illiterate, compared with 20% of those in towns and cities of that province, according to the 1981 Census data.(21) In northern Saskatchewan, where as many as half of the residents may be functionally illiterate, isolation has been an important factor, along with a transient lifestyle.(22)

In Newfoundland, also, a Royal Commission reported in 1986 that "most rural areas of the province exhibit rates of literacy which fall below the provincial average by a considerable margin."(23) The Commission recognized that during the decade from 1975 to 1985 improvement had taken place, "with a greater proportion of the population completing high school and going on to post-secondary education in 1985."(24) Nevertheless, it noted that in 1985 "30 per cent of the Newfoundland population were still functionally illiterate (less than Grade Nine education) compared to 19 per cent for Canada as a whole."(25)

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(19) M.S. Devereaux, One in Every Five: A Survey of Adult Education in Canada, Secretary of State and Statistics Canada, Ottawa, 1985, p. 4.

(20) Statistics Canada, Education in Canada (1988), p. 248.

(21) Z. Olijnyk, "Farm Life, Remoteness Have Had Effect on Saskatchewan," Leader Post, Special Report on Literacy, Regina, October 1987, p. 8-9 at p. 8.

(22) Ibid., p. 9.

(23) Building on Our Strengths, Report of the Royal Commission on Employment and Unemployment, St. John's, Newfoundland, 1986, p. 316.

(24) Ibid., p. 210.

(25) Ibid.

Although there may be a tendency to view illiteracy as primarily a rural problem, this perception is inaccurate in terms of numbers affected by it. The 1981 Report by the Special Committee on Employment Opportunities for the '80s indicated that "70 percent of the functionally illiterate are found in cities. As examples: in 1976, 32.1 percent in Montreal, 29.1 percent in Thunder Bay and 22.5 percent in Winnipeg had less than a grade nine education." (26)

### **B. Age, Gender and Language**

There is a higher than average rate of illiteracy among older Canadians. The Southam Survey indicated that nearly half of the functionally illiterate are 55 years of age or older, although this group represents only 29% of the total population. Some 30% of the illiterates surveyed in 1987 were over 65 years old, as compared with 16% of the general population. (27) (In 1983, only 4% of those 65 and older participated in adult education courses.) (28)

Statistics Canada studies have indicated that, while the incidence of low educational attainment is high among older age groups, the situation has been improving. In 1985, almost half (48%) of the 65 and over population and nearly one third (32%) of those between 45 and 64 years had less than Grade 9 education. This actually represents a considerable improvement over the situation ten years earlier. In 1975, 59% of the group 65 and over and 40% of those aged 45 to 64, had less than Grade 9 schooling. (29)

Gender also appears to be a factor in determining the likelihood of illiteracy in Canada. The Southam Survey found that 53.5% of the functionally illiterate were men and 46.5%, women. (30) This

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(26) Work for Tomorrow (1981), p. 69.

(27) Calamai (1987), p. 16.

(28) Devereaux (1985), p. 7.

(29) Statistics Canada, "Low Educational Attainment in Canada, 1975-1985," Canadian Social Trends, Spring 1987, p. 28-32 at p. 29; see Appendix, p. iii.

(30) Calamai (1987), p. 7.



indicates a change since 1976 when the Census data showed an almost even division. A national survey in 1983 found that, in every age group, women were more likely than men to take adult education courses. Participation rates in the 17-to 24-year-old age bracket were 27% for women compared to only 18% for men.<sup>(31)</sup>

Rates of illiteracy appear to differ, as well, between the two main language groups in Canada. The Survey showed that, overall, 29% of Francophones and 23% of Anglophones were functionally illiterate.<sup>(32)</sup> The difference was less among the younger age groups but was as much as 12 percentage points among those over 55.

### C. Immigrants

According to the Southam Survey, "large-scale immigration accounts for about one million of Canada's 4.5 million adult functional illiterates. Thirty-five per cent of foreign-born residents in the survey were unable to handle everyday literacy tasks; this rises to 42 per cent when adults from the U.S. and British Isles are excluded."<sup>(33)</sup> The Survey indicates that immigrants in 1987 made up about 22% of the functionally illiterate in Canada and approximately 33% of those in Ontario.<sup>(34)</sup>

There has been, nevertheless, an improvement in the level of education among immigrants to Canada over the years. Before 1946 the illiterate numbered about one out of two, compared with one in four in 1969-71<sup>(35)</sup> and slightly more than one in five in 1987.

Although immigrants compose a declining proportion of the illiterates in the Canadian population as a whole, within the immigrant group itself the problem continues to be of serious proportions. In 1971

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(31) Devereaux (1985), p. 6.

(32) Calamai (1987), p. 7.

(33) Ibid., p. 22.

(34) Ibid.

(35) A.M. Thomas, Adult Basic Education and Literacy Activities in Canada 1975-76, World Literacy of Canada, Toronto, 1976, p. 36.

over 38% of the adult immigrant population was functionally illiterate;<sup>(36)</sup> this decreased slightly, to 35%, in 1987.

#### D. Native People

An OECD review of national educational policies reported in 1976 that only about two out of every five Registered Indian children in Canada completed Grade 9. It stated that "Estimates of illiteracy (among the Native people) do not exist, but it is probably quite high, especially among the older ... population."<sup>(37)</sup> In 1981 the Report of the Special Committee on Employment Opportunities for the '80s estimated that 50% of Indians and Inuit had less than a Grade 8 education.<sup>(38)</sup> A study published in 1983 stated that, based on 1980 information, participation of the indigenous people "in elementary schools is close to the national level ... The drop-out rate through to the end of secondary school, however, is about 80 per cent compared to a national rate of 25 per cent."<sup>(39)</sup>

Further research prepared for the Department of the Secretary of State of Canada has shown that in 1981 about 37% of the Native population over 15 years of age had less than Grade 9 education.<sup>(40)</sup> This study concluded that the "record of school attainment by Native People, over 15 years of age, is quite different from that of non-Natives ... the overall level of education (is) lower for Native people."<sup>(41)</sup>

Recent research prepared for Health and Welfare Canada is reported to describe the future prospects of the Arctic Inuit as bleak,

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(36) Ibid., p. 35.

(37) Reviews of National Policies for Education: Canada, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Paris, 1976, p. 58.

(38) Work for Tomorrow (1981), p. 69.

(39) Thomas (1983), p. 101.

(40) P.M. White, Native Women: A Statistical Overview, Department of Secretary of State of Canada, Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1986, p. 16.

(41) Ibid.



"marked (as they are) by poor levels of education and high unemployment." (42)

### E. The Incarcerated

In 1981, 39.5% of inmates of federal penitentiaries in Canada had less than a Grade 9 education; this was about 10% higher than the percentage of those at the same level in the general population. (43) The highest rates of inmates with less than Grade 5 education were in the Atlantic Region and Quebec and the lowest rate was in British Columbia. Illiteracy continues to be a frequent characteristic of the incarcerated. In 1987 the Department of the Attorney General of Nova Scotia disclosed that more than half of the prisoners in that province's jails were functionally illiterate. (44)

Commenting on prison education in Canada, one author has stated that most of the inmates of federal prisons are undereducated, "although the I.Q. distribution among the inmate population is not significantly different from that of the general population". (45)

Native people are over-represented within prison populations in Canada, particularly in the western provinces. In 1985, native offenders constituted 10% of all admissions to federal custody, and 18% of those to provincial facilities. (46)

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(42) Rudy Platiel, "Inuit Face Bleak Future of Welfare, Crime, Study Says," Globe and Mail (Toronto), 24 August 1988.

(43) Thomas (1983), p. 101. It should be noted that, when these data were collected, more than one third of the total number of prisoners did not state the level of their education. This fact suggests that even more than 40% may have been functionally illiterate.

(44) Canadian Press Newstex, 20 October 1987.

(45) J.W. Cosman, "Penitentiary Education in Canada," in Lucien Morin, ed., On Prison Education, Minister of Supply and Services, Ottawa, 1981, p. 39.

(46) Craig McKie, "Canada's Prison Population," Canadian Social Trends, Summer 1987, p. 2-7 at p. 3.

## THE EFFECTS OF ILLITERACY

To say that the costs of illiteracy are great is an understatement; its overall effects, for the nation and for individuals, are incalculable. Clearly, however, the enormous economic and social costs are borne by governments, business and society in general, as well as by the directly affected individuals and their families.

The Southam Survey has suggested that, in calculating "Canada's illiteracy bill," the following items should be considered:

- Unnecessary UIC payments
- Inflated consumer prices to cover mistakes
- Extra medical and worker compensation charges
- Tuition fees lost by illiterate students
- Dwindling revenues for publishers
- Subsidies for industry retraining
- Wages lowered by illiteracy
- Jail for frustrated illiterates
- Lost taxes
- Reduced international competitiveness
- Blighted, unhappy lives for millions(47)

### A. Economic Costs

The Canadian Business Task Force carried out a study to prepare "a reasonable estimate of the order of magnitude of the cost of illiteracy to business in particular and society in general." (48) Its results were published in February 1988.

Stressing that in the absence of more complete research its analysis was, in effect, "an exercise in practical guesswork," the Task Force estimated the direct annual cost of illiteracy to business in Canada at about \$4 billion annually and to society as a whole at approximately \$10 billion.(49) Its estimates included as costs to business,

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(47) Calamai (1987), p. 32.

(48) Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy, Measuring the Costs of Illiteracy in Canada, February 1988, p. 4.

(49) Ibid., p. 3.



\$1.6 billion for industrial accidents, \$2.5 billion for lost productivity and \$.05 billion for direct training. Costs to society included \$1.6 billion for industrial accidents, \$.05 billion for direct training, \$8.8 billion for lost earnings, .17 billion for unemployment expenses and .08 billion for federal prisons.(50)

Although they were recognized as cost areas, no explicit estimate was made in this report for the following items:

excessive supervisory time, lack of trainability or promotability, poor morale and absenteeism, consumer health and safety, other social assistance programs, federal adult education programs, all items within the jurisdiction of municipal or provincial governments, and many effects of social alienation.(51)

As these considerations suggest, illiteracy affects almost every aspect of modern life in both business and social worlds, making any calculation of its full economic costs an impossible task. It is equally difficult to assess its social costs. What is clear, however, is that illiteracy represents a handicap for individuals and serious problems for society as a whole.

## **B. Social Effects**

Education has long been seen as "a key to 'the good life', and a leveller to inherited social circumstances."(52) The lack of it is associated with many problems.

To attempt to identify the social effects of illiteracy, however, is an extremely complicated undertaking. Complex relationships among various factors affect individual social outcomes. Cause and effect are difficult to separate. It is, therefore, more accurate to discuss circumstances often associated with illiteracy than to speak of its effects or results. Those with low education tend to have poorer health, a shorter

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(50) Ibid., p. 7; see Research Summary, Appendix, p. iv.

(51) Ibid.

(52) Thomas (1983), p. 99.

life expectancy and more disabilities. Other circumstances often related to illiteracy are poverty, unemployment and personal problems.

### 1. Poverty

An OECD study concluded in 1976 that "Canada, like most other countries, is still a long way from breaking the vicious cycle of poverty, leading to inadequate education, meagre job opportunities, and continued poverty in the next generation."<sup>(53)</sup> More than a decade later, the Southam Survey has provided evidence of the continuing truth of this statement; there are still substantial numbers of illiterates in Canada and their personal income in 1987 was 44% less than that of others.<sup>(54)</sup>

Poverty is particularly severe among the elderly. Research prepared for the National Council on Welfare showed that, although there had been improvement, in 1982 about 57.7% of people over 65 who lived alone were still below the poverty line.<sup>(55)</sup> As mentioned previously, the elderly are also in disproportionate numbers among the functionally illiterate.

The link between illiteracy and poverty is clear: under-educated people usually have low-paying jobs and many are unable to find work at all.

### 2. Unemployment

The connection between illiteracy and unemployment in western democracies has been well established. In 1979 a National Commission in the United States recognized the close association between educational achievement and employment opportunity: "the higher an individual's educational attainment, the more likely he or she is to be in

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(53) Reviews of National Policies for Education: Canada, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Paris, 1976, p. 56.

(54) Calamai (1987), p. 16.

(55) "Government Lauded for Steady Decline in Poverty Figures," Globe and Mail (Toronto), 10 February 1984.



the labor force, to avoid unemployment, to hold a better job, and to attain higher lifetime earnings."<sup>(56)</sup>

This relationship has been pointed out by studies in Canada as well. The Parliamentary Task Force on Employment Opportunities for the '80s noted that, at the beginning of this decade, the 44% labour force participation rate of the functionally illiterate was much lower than average.<sup>(57)</sup> The Newfoundland Royal Commission on Employment and Unemployment concluded in 1986 that "it is still the case that the better educated one is, the better the chance of finding a job."<sup>(58)</sup> In that province in 1985, 28.7% of the unemployed had less than nine years of schooling, about 25% had some high school education and 15% had a post-secondary diploma or certificate; no rate of unemployed university graduates was listed owing to the small sample size.<sup>(59)</sup>

The unemployment rate in Canada of persons 15 years and over with less than nine years of schooling was estimated in 1988 to be 10.4%, compared with 8.9% for those with high school attainment, 6.7% for holders of post-secondary certificates and 5.1% for those with university degrees. The overall unemployment rate was 7.6%.<sup>(60)</sup> A substantial number of adults in Canada lack the level of literacy necessary for access to further training leading to employment; their lack of education is a serious handicap in seeking jobs or advancement in the work place.

(Acquiring an education, however, is only one factor among those leading to employment, promotion and higher rates of pay. Women, for example, although shown by the Southam Survey to be less likely to be illiterate than men and although they participate more than men in adult education courses,<sup>(61)</sup> nevertheless are less likely than men to find

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(56) United States, National Commission on Employment and Unemployment Statistics, Counting the Labor Force, 1979, p. 105.

(57) Work for Tomorrow (1981), p. 35.

(58) Building on Our Strengths (1986), p. 210.

(59) Ibid., p. 212 and see Table 6.3, Appendix, p. v.

(60) Statistics Canada, The Labour Force, July 1988, p. 31, Appendix, p. i.

(61) See Appendix, p. vi, for Statistics Canada data.

jobs; there has also been and continues to be a "pattern of higher pay for men than women."(62))

### 3. Personal Problems

Illiteracy may also be linked to a range of personal problems such as low self-esteem, maladjustment in society and feelings of depression.

One author, describing the plight of functionally illiterate and unemployed men in Toronto who lacked the education and self-confidence necessary to be able to take advantage of any available courses or programs, stated:

Their major experience of life so far has been that of failure, and their present state of chronic or recurring unemployment only increases their permanent sense of defeat. The various socio-economic and emotional problems that complicate their lives are, as often as not, symptoms of the underlying sense of failure, and the effect is generally cumulative.(63)

## REMEDIAL MEASURES

The extent of illiteracy in Canada and its harmful effects illustrate the need for concentrated efforts to overcome this major social problem. Various remedial programs have been undertaken by governments and by voluntary organizations in Canada.

### A. Government Programs

The federal government for some years has provided funds through the Department of Secretary of State to support voluntary, community-based initiatives for literacy training. In addition, the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission has funded literacy programs as part

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(62) A. Rauhala, "Largest Companies Fail Test for Equal Job Opportunities," Globe and Mail (Toronto), 24 October 1988.

(63) Education Centre Library Reports No. 3, Aspects of Illiteracy, The Board of Education for the City of Toronto, May 1962, p. 50.



of job readiness training. Special assistance for language training has been provided to immigrants and refugees. In federal correctional institutions, education at both the basic and higher levels has been made available to inmates. The Education and Training Division of the Correctional Service of Canada offers inmates vocational and academic courses, ranging from literacy and life skills, through secondary upgrading, to college certificate/diploma and university degree programs. Courses are offered at 26 schools in medium and maximum institutions as well as some in minimum security institutions.(64)

The provincial and territorial governments all provide some form of literacy training, usually as part of adult basic education programs delivered by means of community college systems.

The Task Force on Employment Opportunities for the '80s made several recommendations for action the federal government could take to fight illiteracy. These included the adoption of a ten-year National Right to Read Program and major publicity and information plans. The approach to illiteracy taken since then by the federal government has been in the direction of some of the recommendations of the Task Force, for example, in working "together with the provinces and interested groups to provide facilities and resources to deal effectively with this problem."(65)

The Speech from the Throne on 1 October 1986 committed the federal government "to work with the provinces, the private sector, and voluntary organizations to develop resources to ensure that Canadians have access to the literacy skills that are prerequisites for participation in our advanced economy."

Following federal-provincial negotiations, a National Literacy Secretariat was established within the Department of Secretary of State "to work closely with the provinces, volunteer and community groups, labour and the private sector."(66)

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(64) Solicitor General, Annual Report 1986-1987, Minister of Supply and Services, Canada, Ottawa, 1988, p. 55.

(65) Work for Tomorrow (1981), Recommendation 14, p. 72.

(66) Department of the Secretary of State, Statement by the Secretary of State, the Honourable David Crombie on the occasion of World Literacy Day, 8 September 1987.

Discussions between the two levels of government during 1987 and 1988 have resulted in agreements to support a number of literacy initiatives through combined federal-provincial funding. These included, for example, support for the following:

In 1987(67)

- the Saskatchewan Literacy Council voluntary literacy program, a public awareness campaign and development of learner materials and training;
- literacy initiatives in Manitoba, including program development and training, information exchange and pilot projects to develop training initiatives for native peoples and to focus on rural and remote communities;
- literacy projects in British Columbia, to include tutor training programs for delivery by "Knowledge" network, native literacy consultation, a learner conference, and establishment of an adult literacy contact centre to develop and disseminate literacy resources.

In 1988(68)

- projects of the Alberta Association for Adult Literacy and the Literacy Coordinators of Alberta to develop public education materials relating to adult literacy and to train educators and run professional development workshops for literacy coordinators;
- establishment in Newfoundland of an Office of Policy Advisor on Literacy, development of materials to promote literacy, an awareness program, training workshops for tutors and assistance to community colleges;
- a forum on continuing education in Inuvik to recommend education strategies in the Northwest Territories;
- production of a "learn-to-read" television series for New Brunswick, and development of learner materials and practitioner training;

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(67) Department of the Secretary of State of Canada, News Releases, 27 October 1987, 5 November 1987 and 19 November 1987.

(68) Department of Secretary of State of Canada, News Releases, 18 January 1988, 3 February 1988, 17 March 1988, 30 March 1988, 26 April 1988, 3 May 1988, 7 July 1988, 27 July 1988, and 9 September 1988.



- projects in Quebec, by the Regroupement des groupes populaires en alphabétisation du Québec, to raise public awareness and develop public literacy, and by the Centre de documentation sur l'éducation des adultes et la condition féminine to develop and make available documentation on literacy and increase accessibility of its material on adult education and the status of women;
- projects in Prince Edward Island to promote literacy awareness in the Francophone community and research on the needs of Francophones, and to train Provincial Literacy Volunteers and continue public awareness programs;
- consultation services of an adult literacy educator for Yukon College community campuses, a summer institute for instructors and literacy materials;
- four projects in Ontario, including TV Ontario production of video-tapes in French to promote awareness and provide training and of two video-tapes on literacy training for persons with disabilities, and George Brown College projects to establish a micro-computer communications network for a lending library and system support to community literacy sites, and to set up a training institute for trainers of workplace literacy practitioners;
- new initiatives in British Columbia, including Literacy in the Workplace, a cooperative effort of business, industry, labour and educators for work-specific literacy training in the workplace, and a Volunteer Tutor Evaluation Instrument, a resource to help provide high-quality instruction.

On 8 September 1988 the federal government announced its intention to invest \$110 million over five years to fight illiteracy in Canada, with a strategy focusing on both preventive and remedial measures.<sup>(69)</sup> The proposed national strategy would provide continuing support for joint federal-provincial-territorial initiatives, for efforts of the voluntary sector and for the activities of the National Literacy Secretariat.<sup>(70)</sup>

## **B. The Voluntary Sector and Others**

Numerous voluntary organizations in Canada have been working for many years to overcome adult illiteracy. Perhaps the oldest among them

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(69) Department of the Secretary of State of Canada, News Release, 8 September 1988.

(70) Ibid.

is Frontier College, established in Toronto in 1899. In its early years, Frontier College offered much-needed educational opportunities in isolated areas such as northern forestry camps and mining towns. Since then, it has grown and responded to changing conditions. In 1977 it received a UNESCO Literacy Prize for its work. It now provides volunteer instructors in a variety of locations where the need is great, including factories, Native reserves, and prisons.

Although the Correctional Services of Canada provides full-time teachers in federal institutions, some inmates are better able to learn from a volunteer tutor on a less formal, part-time basis. Frontier College has cooperated with the correctional authorities to offer these services. In 1985, for example, 45 of its tutors instructed 64 inmates at the five correctional institutions in the Kingston area.<sup>(71)</sup>

Frontier College continues to operate as a voluntary organization, although it now receives some provincial funding in Ontario. The federal government in 1987 provided a grant of \$1.2 million to the organization to teach illiterate street people in two cities over the next three years, an extension of its "Beat the Street" program in Toronto.<sup>(72)</sup> Coordinators of this program "use one-on-one tutoring to teach basic reading and writing to street people in their own environment ... Tutors are usually people who have learned to read and write through the program and have credibility with street people."<sup>(73)</sup> A coordinator estimated that 50% of the Toronto street people are illiterate.<sup>(74)</sup>

On 8 September 1988 the Secretary of State announced that federal funding would be granted to Frontier College to establish a national organization to encourage Canadians across the country to

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(71) Catherine Thompson, "For Prison Inmates, Literacy Helps Smooth a Return to the Streets," The Citizen (Ottawa), 7 September 1985, p. F1.

(72) "Beat the Street Gets Federal Funding," Leader-Post, Special Report on Literacy, Regina, October 1987, p. 44.

(73) Ibid.

(74) Ibid.



read.<sup>(75)</sup> As part of this three-year "Nation of Readers" project, these funds will help develop local literacy activities, provide leadership through the participation of eminent Canadians, develop literacy materials and encourage partnership activities with national youth-oriented networks.

Many different voluntary literacy groups exist across Canada, offering services ranging from one-on-one tutoring to full-time literacy training. The Movement for Canadian Literacy, their major umbrella organization, includes both Francophone and Anglophone groups. The Movement was established in 1977 to coordinate efforts to fight illiteracy through networking, advocacy and public awareness. It has about 300 members across Canada, including provincial associations as well as other groups and individuals working in a range of literacy activities. It was also announced in September 1988 that the federal government will provide financial assistance to the Movement for "expanded networking activities, policy development and research."<sup>(76)</sup>

In addition to the efforts of governments and volunteers, the business community and labour unions have taken some initiatives to promote literacy. The Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy, established in 1985 to increase business leaders' awareness of the problem, published a major research study in 1988 on the costs of illiteracy.<sup>(77)</sup>

A number of Canadian labour groups have sponsored activities to help some of their members, especially recent immigrants, to become literate.

## CONCLUSION

Several years ago it was easy for Canadians to be complacent in the assumption that their country was one of the best educated societies

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(75) Department of Secretary of State of Canada, News Release, 8 September 1988.

(76) Ibid., p. 4.

(77) Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy, Measuring the Costs of Illiteracy in Canada, February 1988.

in the world. Recent studies have shown, however, that a substantial proportion of the Canadian public is functionally illiterate and that the national costs of this illiteracy are enormous.

The situation is improving insofar as formal school attainment is concerned. The educational level of Canadians, on average, increased substantially during the 1970s and early 1980s. The percentage of those aged 15 and over with less than Grade 9 schooling decreased from 32.3% in 1971 to 20.7% in 1981<sup>(78)</sup> and to 19% in 1985.<sup>(79)</sup>

In spite of this promising trend, however, a new challenge has been presented to educators in recent years with the realization that functional illiteracy exists even among university graduates. Practical literacy requirements change as society changes.

Significant progress has been made with recent initiatives to promote cooperative efforts between federal and provincial governments and between governments and the private sector. What needs to be done in the future is to maintain the momentum of these efforts and to promote further cooperation among governments, employers, labour, and community and volunteer groups in working together to increase literacy through a wide range of activities.

"An adequate response to the problem of illiteracy is now just beginning. If it is to be effective, it will require inputs from all sections of society... In devising this response, illiteracy should be recognized as a complex, long-term social and cultural problem."<sup>(80)</sup>

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(79) Statistics Canada, Canadian Social Trends, Spring 1987, p. 28.

(80) Cairns (1988), p. 67.



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## APPENDIX





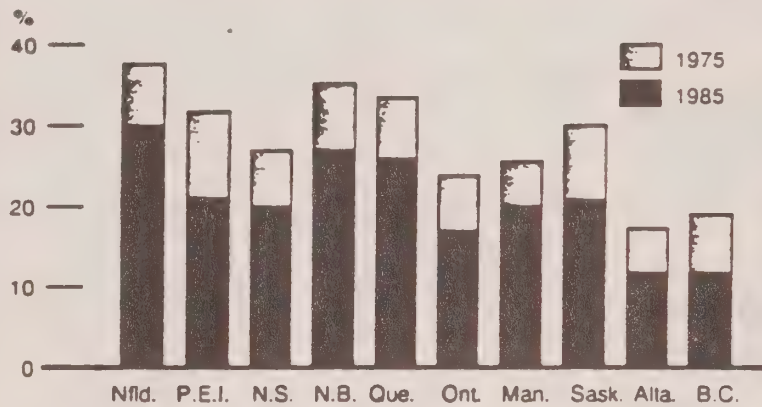
TABLE 8. ESTIMATES BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, JULY 1988

TABLEAU 8. ESTIMATIONS SELON LE NIVEAU D'INSTRUCTION, JUILLET 1988

	POPULATION 15 YEARS AND OVER	LABOUR FORCE POPULATION ACTIVE		NOT IN LABOUR FORCE	PARTICI- PATION RATE	UNEMPLOY- MENT RATE	EMPLOYMENT POPULATION RATIO	
	POPULATION DE 15 ANS ET PLUS	TOTAL	EMPLOYMENT EMPLOI	UNEMPLOY- MENT CHOMAGE	POPULATION INACTIVE	TAUX D'ACTIVITE	TAUX DE CHOMAGE	RAPPORT EMPLOI- POPULATION
		THOUSANDS - MILLIERS			PER CENT - POURCENTAGE			
CANADA	20,092	13,872	12,820	1,052	6,221	69.0	7.6	63.8
0-8 YEARS - 0 A 8 ANNEES	3,509	1,401	1,255	146	2,108	39.9	10.4	35.8
HIGH SCHOOL (1) - ETUDES SECONDAIRES (1)	9,764	6,854	6,247	607	2,911	70.2	8.9	64.0
SOME POST-SECONDARY - ETUDES POSTSECON- DAIRES PARTIELLES	1,858	1,502	1,402	100	356	80.9	6.7	75.5
POST-SECONDARY CERTIFICATE OR DIPLOMA - CERTIFICAT OU DIPLOME D'ETUDES	2,582	2,098	1,991	107	484	81.2	5.1	77.1
POSTSECONDAIRES	2,379	2,017	1,924	92	362	84.8	4.6	80.9
UNIVERSITY DEGREE - GRADE UNIVERSITAIRE								
MALES - HOMMES	9,819	7,843	7,313	530	1,977	79.9	6.8	74.5
0-8 YEARS - 0 A 8 ANNEES	1,736	935	845	90	801	53.9	9.6	48.7
HIGH SCHOOL (1) - ETUDES SECONDAIRES (1)	4,692	3,859	3,555	304	833	82.2	7.9	75.8
SOME POST-SECONDARY - ETUDES POSTSECON- DAIRES PARTIELLES	914	813	767	46	101	89.0	5.6	84.0
POST-SECONDARY CERTIFICATE OR DIPLOMA - CERTIFICAT OU DIPLOME D'ETUDES	1,130	1,023	978	45	107	90.5	4.4	86.5
POSTSECONDAIRES	1,347	1,212	1,167	44	135	90.0	3.7	86.7
UNIVERSITY DEGREE - GRADE UNIVERSITAIRE								
FEMALES - FEMMES	10,273	6,029	5,507	522	4,244	58.7	8.7	53.6
0-8 YEARS - 0 A 8 ANNEES	1,773	466	410	56	1,307	26.3	11.9	23.2
HIGH SCHOOL (1) - ETUDES SECONDAIRES (1)	5,072	2,995	2,692	303	2,078	59.0	10.1	53.1
SOME POST-SECONDARY - ETUDES POSTSECON- DAIRES PARTIELLES	944	689	635	54	255	73.0	7.9	67.2
POST-SECONDARY CERTIFICATE OR DIPLOMA - CERTIFICAT OU DIPLOME D'ETUDES	1,452	1,075	1,013	62	377	74.0	5.7	69.8
POSTSECONDAIRES	1,032	805	757	48	227	78.0	5.9	73.3
UNIVERSITY DEGREE - GRADE UNIVERSITAIRE								
15 - 24 YEARS - 15 A 24 ANS	3,944	3,239	2,867	372	705	82.1	11.5	72.7
0-8 YEARS - 0 A 8 ANNEES	299	172	140	32	127	57.6	18.6	46.9
HIGH SCHOOL (1) - ETUDES SECONDAIRES (1)	2,407	1,951	1,685	267	456	81.1	13.7	70.0
SOME POST-SECONDARY - ETUDES POSTSECON- DAIRES PARTIELLES	679	601	560	41	77	88.6	6.8	82.5
POST-SECONDARY CERTIFICATE OR DIPLOMA - CERTIFICAT OU DIPLOME D'ETUDES	393	363	341	23	29	92.6	6.2	86.8
POSTSECONDAIRES	167	151	142	9	16	90.4	6.1	84.8
UNIVERSITY DEGREE - GRADE UNIVERSITAIRE								
25 YEARS AND OVER - 25 ANS ET PLUS	16,148	10,633	9,953	680	5,515	65.8	6.4	61.6
0-8 YEARS - 0 A 8 ANNEES	3,210	1,229	1,115	114	1,981	38.3	9.3	34.7
HIGH SCHOOL (1) - ETUDES SECONDAIRES (1)	7,357	4,903	4,562	340	2,455	66.6	6.9	62.0
SOME POST-SECONDARY - ETUDES POSTSECON- DAIRES PARTIELLES	1,179	901	842	59	278	76.4	6.5	71.4
POST-SECONDARY CERTIFICATE OR DIPLOMA - CERTIFICAT OU DIPLOME D'ETUDES	2,189	1,734	1,650	84	455	79.2	4.9	75.4
POSTSECONDAIRES	2,212	1,866	1,783	83	346	84.3	4.4	80.6
UNIVERSITY DEGREE - GRADE UNIVERSITAIRE								
NEWFOUNDLAND - TERRE-NEUVE	434	268	226	42	165	61.7	15.6	52.1
0-8 YEARS - 0 A 8 ANNEES	119	48	38	10	72	39.9	20.8	31.6
HIGH SCHOOL (1) - ETUDES SECONDAIRES (1)	191	119	98	21	72	62.4	17.7	51.3
SOME POST-SECONDARY - ETUDES POSTSECON- DAIRES PARTIELLES	38	29	26	...	9	77.2	...	68.8
POST-SECONDARY CERTIFICATE OR DIPLOMA - CERTIFICAT OU DIPLOME D'ETUDES	60	49	43	6	11	81.0	12.0	71.3
POSTSECONDAIRES	26	23	22	...	...	90.0	...	83.9
UNIVERSITY DEGREE - GRADE UNIVERSITAIRE								
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND - I.-DU-PRINCE-EDOUARD	98	68	61	7	30	69.7	10.5	62.4
0-8 YEARS - 0 A 8 ANNEES	19	9	7	...	10	45.0	...	36.8
HIGH SCHOOL (1) - ETUDES SECONDAIRES (1)	54	39	34	4	15	72.0	10.8	64.2
SOME POST-SECONDARY - ETUDES POSTSECON- DAIRES PARTIELLES	7	6	6	...	...	85.3	...	81.2
POST-SECONDARY CERTIFICATE OR DIPLOMA - CERTIFICAT OU DIPLOME D'ETUDES	11	9	8	...	...	80.4	...	74.9
POSTSECONDAIRES	8	7	6	...	...	85.0	...	77.6
UNIVERSITY DEGREE - GRADE UNIVERSITAIRE								
NOVA SCOTIA - NOUVELLE-ECOSSE	684	440	401	39	244	64.3	8.9	58.6
0-8 YEARS - 0 A 8 ANNEES	119	46	39	7	73	38.6	14.3	33.1
HIGH SCHOOL (1) - ETUDES SECONDAIRES (1)	357	228	207	21	129	63.8	9.2	58.0
SOME POST-SECONDARY - ETUDES POSTSECON- DAIRES PARTIELLES	56	45	41	5	10	81.5	10.4	73.0
POST-SECONDARY CERTIFICATE OR DIPLOMA - CERTIFICAT OU DIPLOME D'ETUDES	80	60	57	4	19	75.8	6.0	71.2
POSTSECONDAIRES	73	60	57	...	12	82.9	...	78.6
UNIVERSITY DEGREE - GRADE UNIVERSITAIRE								

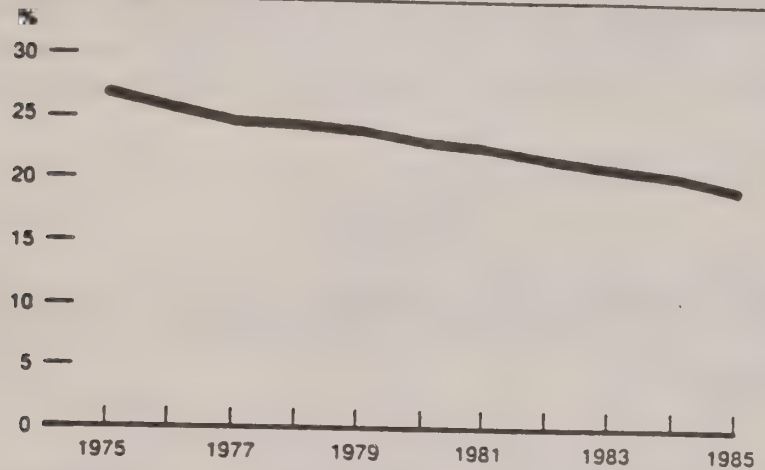
(1) INCLUDES PERSONS WHO HAVE EITHER COMPLETED THEIR SECONDARY EDUCATION OR HAD AT LEAST SOME SECONDARY EDUCATION, BUT WHO HAVE NOT HAD ANY POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION.  
COMPREND LES PERSONNES QUI ONT TERMINE LEURS ETUDES SECONDAIRES OU FAIT AU MOINS DES ETUDES SECONDAIRES PARTIELLES, MAIS QUI N'ONT PAS FAIT D'ETUDES POSTSECONDAIRES.

Percentage of Population Aged 15 and Over, with  
Less than Grade 9 Education, by Province, 1975 and 1985



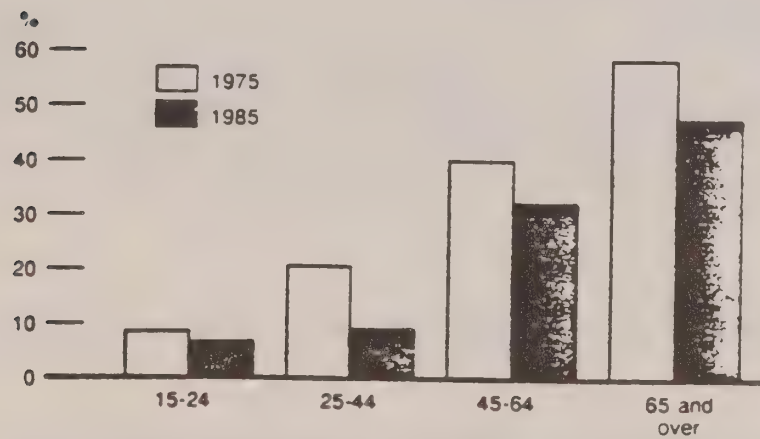
Sources: Statistics Canada, Catalogues 71-529, *Labour Force Annual Averages*, and 71-001, *The Labour Force*.

**Percentage of the Population Aged 15 and Over,  
with Less than Grade 9 Education, 1975-1985**



Sources: Statistics Canada, Catalogues 71-529, *Labour Force Annual Averages*, and 71-001, *The Labour Force*.

**Percentage of Population Aged 15 and Over, with  
Less than Grade 9 Education, by Age, 1975 and 1985**



Sources: Statistics Canada, Catalogues 71-529, *Labour Force Annual Averages*, and 71-001, *The Labour Force*.



## RESEARCH SUMMARY

**Caution:** This table should be read only in the context of the above comments on "Limitations". The full text references in the appendices should also be read for a discussion of definitions, assumptions, data reliability, etc.

Cost	Best Estimate	Reference
(1) Industrial accidents	\$ 1.6 billion	App. I, pp. 15 -17
(2) Lost productivity	2.5	App. I, p. 17 App. II, pp. 1-2, 3-5
(3) Direct training	.05	App. I, pp. 21-22
(4) Lost earnings	8.8	App. I, p. 25 App. II, pp. 3-5
(5) Unemployment expenses	.17	App. I, p. 26
(6) Federal prisons	.08	App. II, p. 2
Direct costs to business (1), (2) & (3)		\$ 4.2 billion
Costs to society (1), (3) - (6)		10.7 billion

### Notes:

1. See the references in the appendices for a complete discussion of each estimate.
2. No explicit estimate is attempted for the following identified cost areas: excessive supervisory time, lack of trainability or promotability, poor morale and absenteeism, consumer health and safety, other social assistance programs, federal adult education programs, all items within the jurisdiction of municipal or provincial governments, and many effects of social alienation. Nevertheless, a number of these areas may be captured indirectly in the estimate of the overall cost to society. See Appendix I for a descriptive discussion of each of these topics.
3. Items (2) and (4) are not mutually exclusive, so (2) is not included in the total cost to society.

**Table 6.3**  
**Unemployment Rate by Educational Attainment**  
Newfoundland, 1975—1985 (Per cent)

	1975	1977	1979	1981	1983	1985
0-8 Years of School	18.8	20.2	19.9	18.5	25.6	28.7
High School <sup>1</sup>	16.0	17.4	16.6	16.1	21.4	25.1
Some Post-Secondary Education	— <sup>2</sup>	—	—	—	16.8	—
Post-Secondary Diploma/Certificate	—	—	—	—	14.0	15.1
University	—	—	—	—	—	—
Newfoundland (Annual Rate)	14.0	15.5	15.1	13.9	18.8	21.3

<sup>1</sup>Includes persons who have either completed their secondary education or at least some secondary education, but who have not had any post-secondary education.

<sup>2</sup>Dash indicates that rate was not published owing to small sample size.

Source: Statistics Canada, 71-529.

TABLE 48. Labour force participation rates and unemployment rates of population 15 years and over, by educational attainment and sex, Canada, 1986

TABLÉAU 48. Taux d'activité et taux de chômage de la population de 15 ans et plus, selon le niveau d'instruction et le sexe, Canada, 1986

Educational attainment  Niveau d'instruction	Labour force participation rate			Unemployment rate		
	Taux d'activité			Taux de chômage		
	Total	Male Hommes	Female Femmes	Total	Male Hommes	Female Femmes
Total	65.7	76.7	55.1	9.6	9.4	9.9
0-8 years - 0-8 années	39.2	53.5	25.2	12.2	11.8	12.9
High school <sup>1</sup> - Études secondaires <sup>1</sup>	67.0	79.1	55.9	11.4	11.2	11.6
Some postsecondary - Études postsecondaires partielles	73.9	80.5	67.2	8.9	8.7	9.0
Postsecondary certificate/diploma - Certificat/diplôme d'études postsecondaires	78.7	88.2	70.9	6.6	6.6	6.6
University degree - Grade universitaire	84.8	90.1	78.0	4.6	3.9	5.7

<sup>1</sup> At least some or completed secondary school, but no postsecondary.

<sup>1</sup> Au moins des études secondaires partielles ou complètes, mais pas d'études postsecondaires.

Source: *The Labour Force*, Statistics Canada (Catalogue 71-001), December 1986.

Source: *La population active*, Statistique Canada, n° 71-001 au catalogue, décembre 1986.

Source: Statistics Canada, Education in Canada (1988), p. 250.

# Labour Force Participation Rates for Men and Women, by Educational Attainment and Age, 1976 and 1985

	1976				1985			
	Less than grade 9	Some high school	Some post-secondary	University degree	Less than grade 9	Some high school	Some post-secondary	University degree
%								
Men								
15-24	57.8	68.3	64.7	79.8	51.4	71.1	67.5	80.7
25-44	91.3	96.9	95.2	96.4	85.2	95.1	93.9	98.1
45-64	79.3	88.9	90.0	93.9	72.5	86.9	86.2	92.5
Women								
15-24	35.7	54.4	58.9	81.3	35.4	62.6	66.8	84.1
25-44	39.1	52.5	59.2	70.6	46.7	66.9	75.4	83.8
45-64	30.0	44.7	49.0	59.4	32.9	49.9	59.1	71.4

Source: Statistics Canada, *The Labour Force Survey*, unpublished data.

Source: Canadian Social Trends, Spring 1987, p. 30.











